

Martin Luther King Jr.—Unedited

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When Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his poetic and prophetic I Have a Dream speech at the feet of Lincoln, America was gripped with a powerful vision of reconciliation and harmony among people of all races and persuasions. Every year we remember that iconic speech. King's beautifully crafted words have become a powerful vehicle for us to evaluate and measure how we are progressing as a nation in the arena of racial inclusiveness and reconciliation.

Many may conclude that we are now living the dream that King could only imagine. For instance, tomorrow, Barack Obama, will be sworn in to his second term as President of the United States. As our first president of African American descent, Barack Obama will be sworn in by a white chief justice. For those who struggled so much during the civil rights movement, this will be a moment every bit as sweet as the first inaugural. Every African American child in this country can look at Barack Obama who traversed the ultimate racial barrier to assume the highest office in the land and imagine that one day that they too may be able to hold that office. My how far we have come!

Through out our land, we will celebrate our unity, our togetherness, and the promise of reconciliation whether that takes place at a Martin Luther King celebration or at the inaugural of the president. But we must confess that these displays of unity can often gloss over the prophetic message which King intended to deliver. Sometimes Martin Luther King celebrations can look more like some sort of slick marketing event where we listen to some innocuous prayer followed by another watered down, superficial speech about racial unity while we eat an expensive breakfast, on place mats emblazoned with pictures of the First family at a fancy hotel served by underpaid wait staff. We then top the whole thing off by holding hands and singing "we shall overcome some day" and then climb in our cars and go back to work and forget about it for another year. This is what I call, Martin Luther King, Jr.--edited

But King was not going to have his ministry edited in this way and bristled when people tried. King was edgier and more prophetic than that. He would not have wanted his prophetic words and the whole truth to be airbrushed and edited away. Sometimes, I even wonder how welcome Martin Luther King would be at some of these commemorative events if he was still living and actually had an opportunity to speak. You see we so often forget the tensions King encountered in northern cities which were supposed to be more open minded and liberal than in the south. King showed America that racism was alive and well in Chicago, and Detroit, Boston and even Burlington. He saw that so many African Americans and indeed many whites lived in abject poverty in these cities. It is well for us to remember that some of the worst race riots took places in northern cities when there was an effort to integrate schools.

Then there was the despicable banking practice of redlining in Northern cities where African Americans could not obtain financing to buy a home in a black neighborhood. Moreover,

realtors would not show black people houses in white neighborhoods where they could get credit for home purchases. When King brought up these and many other inconsistencies, some white liberals got nervous and went back to talking about these high minded images of unity of racial harmony of which King spoke while ignoring their own complicity in a structural racism. King also encountered some African Americans who worried that King was disrupting the little bit of progress that was made in the arena of civil rights. Indeed, King came in for some of the harshest criticism from some in the civil rights movement when he decided to speak out against the Vietnam War from the pulpit of the Riverside Church. He was concerned that the war constituted a new form of colonialism which was tragically draining so many resources that could be better used at home to help the poor. Some blacks and many whites did not want King to do anything which might offend President Johnson who championed the War on Poverty and signed the Civil Rights Acts into law.

In the face of such harsh criticism, King confessed that people often did not understand all of what he was about. In his sermon, Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence, at Riverside, he spoke of the harsh criticism he received from people who asked ““Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent?” "Peace and civil rights don't mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?" they ask.” But King said, “when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.”ⁱ

In other sermons, King often referred to Jesus’ inaugural address which we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke by saying that the spirit of the Lord was upon him as he sought to bridge a racial divide. Martin Luther King, Jr. would say in his sermon Guidelines for a Constructive Church, that “we who are followers of Jesus Christ, and we who must keep his church going and keep it alive, also have certain basic guidelines to follow. Somewhere behind the dim mist of eternity, God set forth his guidelines. And through his prophets, and above all through his son Jesus Christ, he said that, "There are some things that my church must do. There are some guidelines that my church must follow." And if we in the church don't want the funds of grace cut off from the divine treasury, we've got to follow the guidelines.” King continued that “the guidelines are clearly set forth for us in some words uttered by our Lord and Master as he went in the temple one day, and he went back to Isaiah and quoted from him. And he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. These are the guidelines.”ⁱⁱ

King acknowledged that there was a lot of pressure in both black and white churches not to attend to the guidelines. The same is true today. There are political pressures in the church and our society today to shy away from the guidelines which Jesus laid out. Did we ever wonder why it might be difficult for our president, living in our dreamy post racial society, who during his first campaign delivered one of the most powerful speeches on race relations in Philadelphia that our nation has ever heard, has struggled to speak to matters of race and poverty?ⁱⁱⁱ It’s tough to speak in the most forthright terms without the fear of being accused of race identity politics or reverse racism. So the president may avoid wading into these issues for fear of being politically

marginalized or having his words twisted by the talking heads on some of our cable news networks. . How desperately we want to hold on to a picture of racial harmony but all the while fail to probe under the surface for fear what we might find there or what someone will do to us if we speak up.

But if we attend to the guidelines laid out by Jesus, it is time for us to muster up the courage to say there really is a more of an economic, class and racial divide in our country than we may care to admit and this must be discussed with some candor. On this Sunday, the day before our president of African American descent will deliver his inaugural address for a second term on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, I noted with alarm that the National Rifle Association announced a public celebration of what they call Gun Appreciation Day. In a country which is torn apart by gun violence and where shootings in our poorest communities are a daily occurrence and where carnage from domestic gun violence far exceed totals of people lost in the Vietnam War and where we as a nation are reeling from the tragedy at Newtown, the NRA I believe is only cultivating a climate of permissiveness for further gun violence. For King, who taught his whole life the importance of non-violence, holding a gun appreciation day particularly on this Martin Luther King weekend and as we inaugurate an African American president is really quite offensive. I mean what are we going to do? Pack some heat while holding hands with our neighbor singing we shall overcome? It's time for the church to say "enough!" and demand that we find better ways to alleviate violence than encouraging everyone to make a purchase at a gun show and add to their arsenal while calling on school districts to permit school teachers to carry concealed weapons.

And as the stock market approaches a record high and as we see signs of economic progress on the eve of inauguration day, can we also confess that the poor may once again be skated over as we talk about economic renewal? Might we find the courage to question why the poverty rate for African American's is twice of what it is for the overall American population? King once said that he found it strange that people received large tax deductions on their mortgages and other generous federal benefits while, at the same time, displaying a misguided predilection to lecture poor people on how they should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps without assistance. Can we confess that we have squandered so much money on two misguided wars which have drained resources from rebuilding our cities, addressing rural poverty, producing jobs and lifting ups those who have little? As Congress seeks to retire our war debt and balance the federal budget, as people of faith we must have the courage to plead the case for the most marginalized in our society who will least be able to sacrifice to pay off our governmental credit card. In so many ways, if King were living today, I believe he would have a holy impatience with the way in which his dream has been tarnished by national conversations on race, war and poverty which have been so heavily edited and trivialized that we can't deal with what it real and do something.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is not the way. Instead as disciples of Christ, we are called to let the spirit of Jesus work on our heart and live deeply live into King's dream. With Jesus in our heart, we must find ways to break the silence and strip away the fears and political pressures we all experience. If Jesus is working on us we can and must deliver our own powerful inaugural speech where we finally break the physical and psychological chains which have oppressed people in our nation for all too long. There is in Christ a better way, a more perfect way. Or as King said, at the conclusion of Beyond Vietnam, "if we make the right choice, we

will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”^{iv} Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

ⁱⁱ http://mlkkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_guidelines_for_a_constructive_church/

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>

^{iv} <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>